What is claimed is:

1. A method for providing rich media content to a user over a computer network, comprising the steps of:

determining the user's ability to playback said rich media content locally;

providing the user with a version of said rich media content appropriate for said user's ability to playback said rich media content locally;

loading said rich media content into a local cache of the user; and

displaying said rich media content from the user's local cache after said rich media content has been completely loaded.

2. A method according to claim 1, wherein said determining step is transparent to the user.

3. A method according to claim 1, wherein said providing step is transparent to the user.

4. A method according to claim 1, wherein said loading step is ~~transparent to the user.~~

5. A method according to claim 1, wherein said determining step is automatic and requires no initiation by the user.

6. A method according to claim 1, wherein said providing step is automatic and requires no initiation by the user.

7. A method according to claim 1, wherein said loading step is automatic and requires no initiation by the user.

8. A method according to claim 1, wherein said displaying step is automatic and requires no initiation by the user.

9.   A method according to claim 1, wherein said determining step comprises the step of progressing through a set of preferred rich media content playback applications to assess the user's ability to playback said rich media content locally.

10.   A method according to claim 1, wherein said providing step comprises the step of generating a script for said rich media content compatible with the user's ability to playback said rich media content locally.

11.   A method according to claim 1, wherein said providing step further comprises the step of selecting said appropriate version of said rich media content from a set of available versions of said rich media content.

12.   A method according to claim 1, wherein said displaying step comprises the step of displaying said rich media content in a designated display area on a local display of the user's.

13.   A method according to claim 12, wherein said designated display area includes controls for manipulating said rich media content.

14.   A method according to claim 1, wherein said rich media content comprises a video clip.

15.   A method according to claim 14, wherein said video clip is up to 15 seconds long.

16.   A method according to claim 1, wherein said rich media content comprises an advertisement.

17.   A method according to claim 1, wherein said rich media content is provided to the user as a highly compressed digital file.

18. A method according to claim 1, further comprising the step of:

enabling the user to forward said rich media content to another user on the computer network.

19. A method according to claim 18, wherein the user is encouraged to forward said rich media content to another user.

20. A method according to claim 1, wherein the user's local cache resides on a desktop computer connecte.d to the computer network.

21. A method according to claim 1, wherein the user's local cache resides on a laptop computer connected to the computer network.

22. A method according to claim 1, wherein the user's local cache resides on a handheld device connected to the computer network.

23. A method according to claim 1, wherein the user's local cache resides on a telephone connected to the computer network.

24. A method according to claim 1, wherein the user's local cache resides on a set top box connected to the computer network.

25. A method according to claim 1, wherein the user's local cache resides on an Internet appliance connected to the computer network.

26. A method according to claim 1, wherein said providing step comprises providing said rich media content to the user over a wireless computer network.

27. A system for providing rich media content to a user over a computer network, comprising:

    (a) means for determining the user's ability to playback said rich media content locally;

    (b) means for providing the user with a version of said rich media content appropriate for the user's local playback capabilities;

    (c) means for loading said rich media content into a local cache of the user; and

    (d) means for displaying said rich media content from the user's local cache after said rich media content has been completely loaded.

28. A system for providing rich media content to a user over a computer network, comprising:

    (a) means for determining the user's ability to playback said rich media content locally;

    (b) means for providing the user with a version of said rich media content appropriate for the user's local playback capabilities capable of being loaded into a local cache of the user and displayed from the user's local cache after said rich media content has been completely loaded.

29. A computer program product, comprising a computer useable medium having computer program logic stored therein, wherein said computer program logic enables a computer to provide rich media content to a user over a computer network comprising:

    (a) means for determining the user's ability to playback said rich media content locally;

    (b) means for providing the user with a version of said rich media content appropriate for the user's local playback capabilities;

    (c) means for loading said rich media content into a local cache of the user; and

11   (d)   means for displaying said rich media content from the user's

12   local cache after said rich media content has been completely

13   loaded.

1   30.   A method for providing short, highly compressed rich media

2   content to a user over a computer network, comprising the steps of:

3   (a)   automatically and transparently determining the user's ability

4   to playback said rich media content locally;

5   (b)   automatically and transparently providing the user with a

6   version of said rich media content appropriate for the user's

7   local playback capabilities;

8   (c)   automatically and transparently loading said rich media content

9   into a local cache of the user;

10   (d)   automatically displaying in a designated display area on the

11   user's local display said rich media content from the user's

12   local cache after said rich media content has been completely

13   loaded; and

14   (e)   enabling the user to forward said rich media content to another

15   user.